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Knowledge brokers and policy advice in policy formulation

Justyna Bandola-Gill and Catherine Lyall

INTRODUCTION: KNOWLEDGE BROKERS AND POLICYMAKING

CAPTURING THE INVISIBLE: DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO DEFINING KNOWLEDGE BROKERS

The published literature offers multiple definitions of knowledge brokerage, and many studies and policy documents – and, indeed, even practitioners who identify themselves as knowledge brokers – use the term without specifying what they mean by it (Honig, 2004). The phenomenon is variously referred to as knowledge brokers (Jacobson et al., 2003), intermediaries (Honig, 2004), mediators (Osborne, 2004), boundary spanners, research navigators, research liaison officers, knowledge translators and research brokers (Ward et al., 2009). Usually the term ‘knowledge broker’ in the policy arena is used within the paradigm of knowledge exchange and mobilization and implies a two-way interchange between researchers and policymakers (Bielak et al., 2008; Sebba, 2013): knowledge brokerage is aimed at increasing awareness of research among policymakers and encouraging them to use existing research findings, but it is also targeted at encouraging researchers to conduct policy-relevant research (Van Kammen et al., 2006).

It is not always clear if different terms indicate different types of activities or whether they are interchangeable (Knight & Lyall, 2013). Knowledge brokers are usually defined as intermediaries between knowledge producers and knowledge users (Bielak et al., 2008) or as actors bridging the worlds of research and policy (Lomas, 2007). According to Hering (2015, p. 2), knowledge brokerage is ‘an iterative and bidirectional process of translation, tailoring

of information for specific contexts, feedback and integrations'. A review of illustrative definitions is presented in Table 15.1.

Even though knowledge brokerage might be found in different areas of social life, policy is an area particularly conducive to this type of knowledge activity (Meyer, 2010). Examples of organizations performing knowledge brokerage roles in the policy advisory system include think tanks (Osborne, 2004; Sebba, 2013; Smith et al., 2013), advisory committees (Bijker et al., 2009; Kropp & Wagner, 2010; Owens, 2015) and advisory institutions with explicit knowledge brokerage goals (Reinecke, 2015).

The distinction between knowledge brokers and other policy intermediaries, such as government agencies or non-governmental organizations (NGOs), is often blurred. In this chapter we look at knowledge brokers as actors in the policy advisory system. In that sense, the term 'knowledge brokerage' might be more descriptive of what organizations *do*, rather than what they *are*. Advisory bodies might perform knowledge brokerage roles simultaneously with other roles, for example, policy entrepreneurship or advocacy (Owens & Rayner, 1999). Therefore, not all advisory bodies are knowledge brokers, but many science advisory bodies do perform knowledge brokerage roles and we include these types of entities in our analysis. Knowledge brokers are usually portrayed as organisations that refrain from promoting one specific policy solution (Bednarek et al., 2015). This focus on disseminating knowledge, often in the form of research-based policy alternatives (for example, Pielke, 2007), is cited as a factor that differentiates knowledge brokerage from other activities, such as advocacy. However, in the increasingly competitive world of knowledge-based policy advisory systems, knowledge brokers may have to assume more active roles as 'marketers' of different ideas, in contrast to more passive forms of knowledge 'transfer' (Caswill & Lyall, 2013).

<TABLE 15.1 ABOUT HERE>

BETWEEN ‘SCIENTIFICATION OF POLICY’ AND ‘POLICITIZATION OF SCIENCE’: DIFFERENT USES OF EVIDENCE IN POLICYMAKING

DIFFERENT STRATEGIES FOR KNOWLEDGE BROKERAGE

The preceding review of different theoretical approaches to knowledge into policy process clearly demonstrates that knowledge brokers can play different roles, depending on the underlying assumptions about the relationship between knowledge and policy. Part of the reason there is such a diversity of processes within knowledge brokerage is that there are very different views on why research is not often used in policy formulation. Knowledge brokers’ strategies might be seen as ways of responding to these problems. Some approaches assume that the problems stem from insufficient communication and cultural barriers between the policy and science worlds (Lomas, 2000). Therefore, brokers could be effective by providing information or connecting different actors. Other approaches assume the problems are more complex, including the multiplicity of actors involved and the conflicting values and interests present in both knowledge production and policymaking (for example, Smith, 2013b). These approaches therefore support the view that brokers could be effective by encouraging co-production of knowledge by different groups of actors (including scientists and policymakers) and shared formulation of the framing of problems.

The key question this section aims to answer is: what work do knowledge brokers actually do? Various authors present different categorizations of knowledge brokerage roles

(see, for example, Meyer, 2010; Reinecke, 2015; Sin, 2008; Ward et al., 2009; Wesselink et al., 2013). We synthesized these categorizations based on the main focus of the activity and discovered that knowledge brokers' strategies consist of, broadly speaking, three groups of activities: strategies relating to information-sharing (focusing on moving information from science to policy); strategies relating to relationships (focusing on creating links and coordinating the relationship between different actors); and strategies relating to the creation of knowledge in a co-produced way. Each of these groups of strategies is explained in more detail below:

Information-oriented Strategies

Relationship-oriented Strategies

The second group of knowledge brokerage strategies involves creating and supporting relationships between different groups of actors. This category of strategies might be summarized as combining 'know-how' with 'know-who' (as expressed, for example, by Meyer, 2010), as knowledge brokers seek to increase interpersonal contacts and communication between different actors (Ward et al., 2009; see also Lomas, 2000). The category is quite heterogeneous and might be better understood in terms of a spectrum: on one end, knowledge brokers simply create connections between different actors, and on the more active end, knowledge brokers play the role of translators, mediating research between different disciplines and engaging different actors (Michaels, 2009; Turnhout et al., 2013). Relationship-oriented strategies help develop trust between knowledge brokers, policymakers and scientists (Hering, 2015). Translation and mediation are integral processes, and make the process two-way (Sin, 2008; Turnhout et al., 2013).

As noted by Caswill and Lyall (2013), policymakers tend to see research as unfit for their needs in terms of language used, understanding of policy needs, scope of analysis and

usability. Conversely, academic researchers working with policymakers are concerned that their academic freedom and the quality of their research will be negatively impacted by the increased integration of science and policymaking (Caswill & Lyall, 2013). Knowledge brokers, who are capable of synthesizing and translating research into more usable forms (Caswill & Lyall, 2013), can help solve these problems by increasing interaction between researchers and policymakers.

Co-production-oriented Strategies

The most integrative approach to the relationship between research and policymaking is found in the co-production-oriented group of strategies. This category of knowledge brokerage strategies includes activities aimed at producing relevant knowledge by different groups of actors and building capacities for accessing and applying knowledge (Michaels, 2009; Ward et al., 2009). In this group of strategies, knowledge brokers act not to ‘link’ actors located on different sides of the production/use divide but rather to blur the boundaries and serve as a partner to stakeholders (Turnhout et al., 2013), sometimes termed ‘transdisciplinary research’ (Lyall et al., 2015; Pohl, 2008). Knowledge brokers facilitate interactions between different actors, who together create frameworks of policy problems and formulate possible policy solutions (Michaels, 2009). One of the important aspects of knowledge brokers is their role as ‘linguistic creators’ (Meyer, 2010, p. 121) who are able to create a shared vocabulary, clarifying ambiguous terms and explaining how different sides use them (Michaels, 2009).

The particular strategy adopted by knowledge brokers depends on the context, including the type of issue at hand (Dobbins et al., 2009; Lomas, 2000; Ward et al., 2009). Michaels (2009) uses Turnhout et al.’s (2007) typology of policy problems to argue that the roles of knowledge brokers differ based on how the policy problems are structured, including

the scale of agreement of different actors on the goals of the policy and the way of achieving it. Knowledge brokerage may consist of providing information (for well-structured problems, where actors agree on the goals and strategies of reaching these goals); facilitating a learning process (for unstructured problems, with high levels of scientific uncertainty about issues); managing dialogue between different actors in order to develop common concepts (for badly structured issues, with high levels of conflict of interest); or assessing arguments made by different sides of a conflict (for moderately structured issues, with conflicts around costs and benefits) (Michaels, 2009).

TRAITS EXHIBITED BY SUCCESSFUL KNOWLEDGE BROKERS

INFLUENCE IN CONTEXT: MEASURING THE IMPACT OF KNOWLEDGE BROKERS

It is challenging (if not impossible) to ascertain the precise measurement or even definition of knowledge brokers' impact on policymaking (Bijker et al., 2009, p. 141). The influence of knowledge brokerage depends on the broader social, political, economic and empirical background (McNie, 2007; Michaels, 2009; Owens, 2015; Owens & Rayner, 1999). In most cases, a final policy decision cannot be traced back to one factor, but is instead the result of a multiplicity of different processes and interventions (Bednarek et al., 2015; McNie, 2007; Sarewitz & Pielke, 2007).

We have discussed in the third section of this chapter that research evidence can be used in multiple ways in the policymaking process (Nutley et al., 2007; Owens, 2015; Weiss, 1979). However, not all of the situations where policymakers interact with research might be seen as 'influence'. For example, in their study of a scientific advisory body in the Netherlands, Bijker et al. (2009) found that the reach of advisory reports (measured by the numbers of copies sold or citations to the report in the literature and other policy documents)

does not necessarily translate into policy decisions. Sometimes, knowledge brokers may influence the policy process by drawing attention to certain issues, before any recommendations are even made. The act of commissioning an advisory organization to conduct research or produce a summary report might influence policymakers by focusing their learning on formulating or reassessing arguments (Nutley et al., 2007, p. 34; Owens & Rayner, 1999). Owens and Rayner (1999) show that this type of learning occurs when the issues at hand occupy the periphery rather than the core of the policy.

The influence of knowledge brokers on policy formulation, therefore, cannot be separated from the circumstances in which the advice is given. Social and political contexts are often more important determinants of whether evidence can impact policy than the quality of the advice itself (Smith, 2013a, p. 23). One important contextual factor that might affect the likelihood of successful brokerage is that influence on policy is through continuity, particularly in terms of opening ‘windows of opportunity’ in the policymaking process (Hering, 2015). The critical importance of situations when policy advice is needed might be illustrated by the fact that sometimes knowledge brokers wait to share their proposed ideas for a policy solution until such windows are opened (Sebba, 2013; Stone et al., 2001).

Another factor affecting the work of knowledge brokers is the knowledge needs of policymakers. According to Liftin (1994), knowledge brokers are most useful where policymakers do not have sufficient time to commission original research or lack expertise in certain areas. Lövbrand (2007) argues that knowledge brokers have a chance of making an impact in situations where advisors have not made clear recommendations. According to some authors (e.g. Liftin, 1994; Michaels, 2009), knowledge brokerage might be useful in areas of high scientific uncertainty, as these areas require the ability to order and translate knowledge at which knowledge brokers excel.

Finally, the last set of circumstances in which knowledge brokers might be influential relates to the degree of development of policy. New areas of policy enquiry – ones that do not yet have an established policy core – offer more opportunity for knowledge brokers to be involved in policy formulation (Owens & Rayner, 1999). Additionally, there is an increased demand for academic research before and/or after major policy changes or in times of political crisis or contestation (Daviter, 2015; Michaels, 2009; Nutley et al., 2007, p. 76). Therefore, such contexts might open up opportunities for knowledge brokers. In these circumstances, research that resonates with other sources of evidence or advice would be more likely to be taken into account, in contrast to other forms of conflicting advice (Nutley et al., 2007, p. 76).

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has taken stock of research on the roles that knowledge brokers play in policy formulation. Knowledge brokers, as facilitators of evidence uptake in policy, potentially play a role at every stage of the policymaking process. However, as their role is usually related to proposing policy alternatives and assessing them in the light of the existing research base, they are likely to be most active in the policy formulation stage. Knowledge brokers are difficult both to define and to assess, as their activities are multifaceted and highly context-dependent. But these same qualities make knowledge brokers particularly well suited to supporting the complex, interdisciplinary challenges of modern policymaking.

This chapter has identified three basic mechanisms through which knowledge brokers operate: information-related strategies, relationship-related strategies and co-production-related strategies. The activity undertaken will depend on the context of the policy problem and the underlying model of the policy-science relationship. In order to secure influence and bring clarity to Hecló's (1974, p. 305) process of 'collective puzzlement', knowledge brokers

operating at the interface between research and policy therefore need to display a range of traits and be adept at selecting strategies appropriate for their situation. This leads us to the somewhat unsatisfactory conclusion that there is no one single model of knowledge brokerage that can guarantee success within the policymaking process.

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